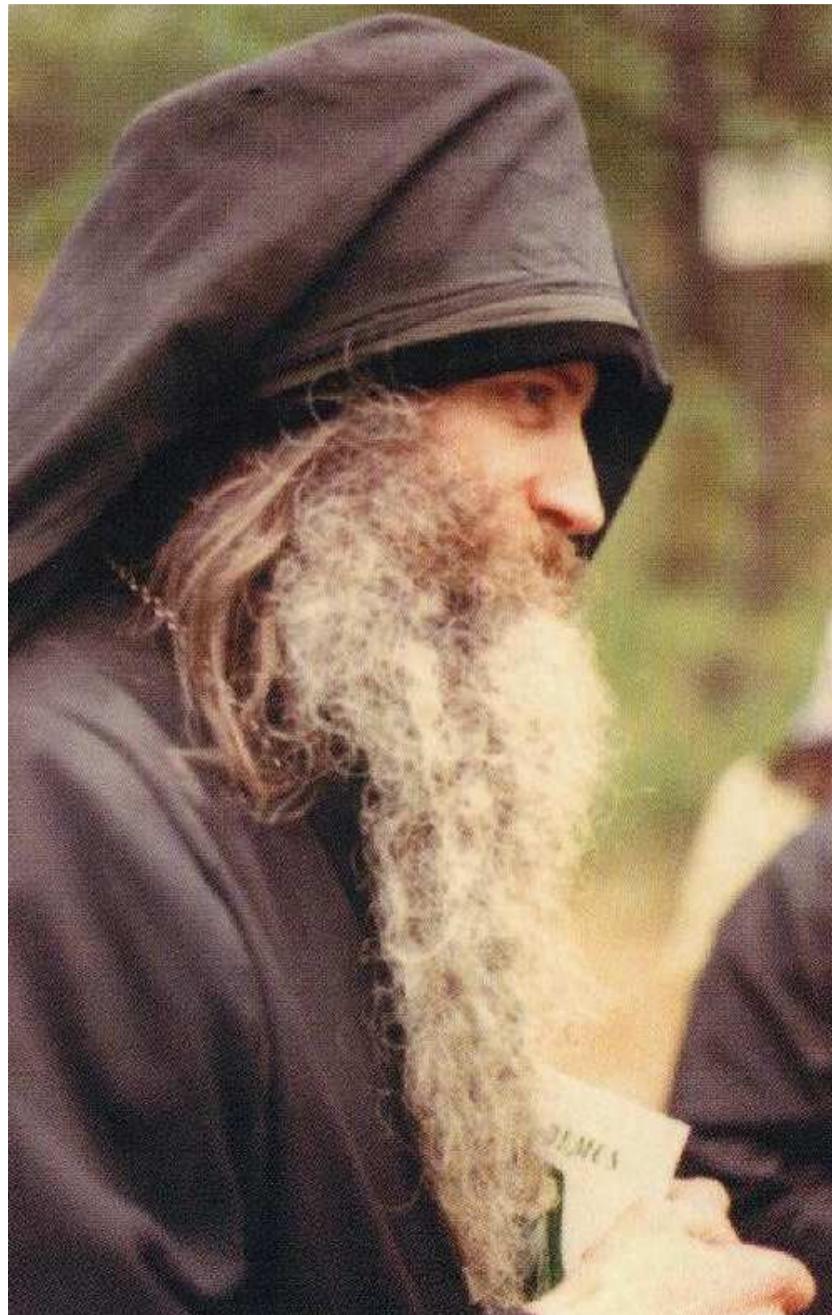


THE HOLY FATHERS:
*A SURE GUIDE TO TRUE
CHRISTIANITY*



By Blessed Hieromonk Seraphim Rose

Remember your instructors, who have spoken
the word of God to you; whose faith follow,
considering the end of their life... Be not led
away with various and strange doctrines.

Hebrews 13:7, 9

NEVER HAS THERE BEEN such an age of false teachers as this pitiful 20th century, so rich in material gadgets and so poor in mind and soul. Every conceivable opinion, even the most absurd, even those hitherto rejected by the universal consent of all civilized peoples—now has its platform and its own "teacher." A few of these teachers come with demonstration or promise of "spiritual power" and false miracles, as do some occultists and "charismatics;" but most of the contemporary teachers offer no more than a weak concoction of undigested ideas which they received "out of the air," as it were, or from some modern self-appointed "wise man" (or woman) who knows more than all the ancients merely by living in our "enlightened" modern times. As a result, philosophy has a thousand schools, and "Christianity" a thousand sects. Where is the truth to be found in all this, if indeed it is to be found at all in our most misguided times?

In only one place is there to be found the fount of true teaching, coming from God Himself, not diminished over the centuries but ever fresh, being one and the same in all those who truly teach it, leading those who follow it to eternal salvation. This place is the Orthodox Church of Christ, the fount is the grace of the All-Holy Spirit, and the true teachers of the Divine doctrine that issues forth from this fount are the Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church.

Alas! How few Orthodox Christians know this, and know enough to drink from this fount! How many contemporary hierarchs lead their flocks, not on the true pastures of the soul, the Holy Fathers, but along the ruinous paths of modern wise men who promise something "new" and strive only to make Christians forget the true teaching of the Holy Fathers, a teaching which—it is quite true—is entirely out of harmony with the false ideas which govern modern times.

The Orthodox teaching of the Holy Fathers is not something of one age, whether "ancient" or "modern." It has been transmitted in unbroken succession from the time of Christ and His Apostles to the present day, and there has never been a time when it was necessary to discover a "lost" patristic teaching. Even when many Orthodox Christians have neglected this teaching (as is the case, for example, in our own day), its true representatives were still handing it down to those who hungered to receive it.. There have been great patristic ages, such as the dazzling epoch of the fourth century, and there have been periods of decline in patristic awareness among Orthodox Christians; but there has been no period since the very foundation of Christ's Church on earth when the patristic tradition was not guiding the Church; there has been no century without Holy Fathers of its own. St. Nicetas Stethatos, disciple and biographer of St. Simeon the New Theologian, has written; "It has been granted by God that from generation to generation there should not cease the preparation by the Holy Spirit of His prophets and friends for the order of

His Church."

Most instructive it is for us, the last Christians, to take guidance and inspiration from the Holy Fathers of our own and recent times, those who lived in condition similar to our own and yet kept undamaged and unchanged the same ever-fresh teaching, which is not for one time or race, but for all times to the end of the world, and for the whole race of Orthodox Christians.

Before looking at two of the recent Holy Fathers, however, let us make clear that for us, Orthodox Christians, the study of the Holy Fathers is not an idle academic exercise. Much of what passes for a "patristic revival" in our times is scarcely more than a plaything of heterodox scholars and their "Orthodox" imitators, not one of whom has ever "discovered" a patristic truth for which he was ready to sacrifice his life. Such "patrology" is only rationalist scholarship which happens to take patristic teaching for its subject, without ever understanding that the genuine teaching of the Holy Fathers contains the truths which our spiritual life or death depends. Such pseudo-patristic scholars spend their time proving that "pseudo-Macarius" was a Messalian heretic, without understanding or practicing the pure Orthodox teaching of the true St. Macarius the Great; that "pseudo-Dionysius" was a calculated forger of books whose mystical and spiritual depths are totally beyond his accusers; that the thoroughly Christian and monastic life of Sts. Barlaam and Joasaph, handed down by St. John Damascene, is nothing but a "retelling of the Buddha story;" and a hundred similar fables manufactured by "experts" for a gullible public which has no idea of the agnostic atmosphere in which such "discoveries" are made. Where there are serious scholarly questions concerning some patristic texts (which, of course, there are), they will certainly not be resolved by referring them to such "experts" who are total strangers to the true patristic tradition, and only make their living at its expense.

When "Orthodox" scholars pick up the teaching of these pseudo-patristic scholars or make their own researches in the same rationalistic spirit, the outcome can be tragic; for such scholars are taken by many to be "spokesmen for Orthodoxy," and their rationalistic pronouncements to be part of an "authentically patristic" outlook, thus deceiving many Orthodox Christians. Father Alexander Schmemann, for example, while pretending to set himself free from the "Western captivity" which, in his ignorance of the true patristic tradition of recent centuries (which is to be found more in the monasteries than in the academies), he fancies to have completely dominated Orthodox theology in modern times, has himself become the captive of Protestant rationalistic ideas concerning liturgical theology, as has been well pointed out by Protopresbyter Michael Pomazansky, a genuine patristic theologian of today.¹ Unfortunately, such a clear unmasking has yet to be made of the pseudo-scholar of Russian Saints and Holy Fathers, G. P. Fedotov, who imagines that St. Sergius "was the first Russian saint who can be termed a mystic" (thereby ignoring the four centuries of equally "mystical" Russian Fathers who preceded him), looks pointlessly for "originality" in the "literary work" of St. Nilus of Sora (thus showing that he does not even understand the meaning of tradition in Orthodoxy), slanders the great Orthodox Saint, Tikhon of Zadonsk, as "the son of

the Western Baroque rather than the heir of Eastern spirituality,"² and with great artificiality tries to make St. Seraphim (who is actually so stunningly in the patristic tradition that he is scarcely to be distinguished from the great Fathers of the Egyptian desert) into some "uniquely Russian" phenomenon who was "the first known representative of this class of spiritual elders (starts) in Russia," whose "approach to the world is unprecedented in the Eastern tradition," and who was "the forerunner of the new form of spirituality which should succeed merely ascetical monasticism."³

Lamentably, the consequences of such pseudo-scholarship often appear in real life; gullible souls who take these false conclusions for genuine begin to work for a "liturgical revival" on Protestant foundations, transform St. Seraphim (ignoring his "inconvenient" teachings regarding heretics, which he shares with the whole patristic tradition) into a Hindu yogin or a "charismatic," and in general approach the Holy Fathers just as do most contemporary scholars—without reverence and awe, as though they were on the same level, as an exercise in esotericism or as some kind of intellectual game, instead of as a guide to true life and salvation.

NOT SO ARE TRUE Orthodox scholars; not so is the true Orthodox patristic tradition, where the genuine, unchanging teaching of true Christianity is handed down in unbroken succession both orally and by the written and printed word, from spiritual father to spiritual son, from teacher to disciple. In the 20th century one Orthodox hierarch stands out especially for his patristic orientation—Archbishop Theophanes of Poltava († 1943, February 19), one of the founders of the free Russian Church Outside of Russia, and perhaps the chief architect of her uncompromising and traditionalist ideology. In the years when he was vice-chairman of the Synod of Bishops of this Church (1920's), he was widely acknowledged as the most patristically-minded of all the Russian theologians abroad. In the 1930's he retired into total seclusion to become a second Theophanes the Recluse; and since then he has been, sadly, very largely forgotten. Fortunately, his memory has been sacredly kept by his disciples and followers, and in recent months one of his leading disciples, Archbishop Averky of Holy Trinity Monastery at Jordanville, New York, has published his biography together with a number of his sermons.⁴ In these sermons may be clearly seen the hierarch's awe and reverence before the Holy Fathers, his discipleship toward them, and his surpassing humility which will be content only when he is transmitting nothing of his own but only the ideas and the very words of the Holy Fathers. Thus, in a sermon on Pentecost Sunday he says: "The teaching of the Holy Trinity is the pinnacle of Christian theology. Therefore I do not presume to set forth this teaching in my own words, but I set it forth in the words of the holy and God-bearing theologians and great Fathers of the Church: Athanasius the Great, Gregory the Theologian, and Basil the Great. Mine only are the lips, but theirs the words and thoughts. They present the Divine meal, and I am only the servant of their Divine banquet." In another sermon, Archbishop Theophanes gives the reasons for his self-effacement before the Holy Fathers—a characteristic so typical of the great

transmitters of patristic teaching, even great theologians in their own right such as Archbishop Theophanes, but which is so glaringly misinterpreted by worldly scholars as a "lack of originality." In his sermon on the Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, given in 1928 in Varna, Bulgaria, he offers to the faithful "a word on the significance of the Holy Fathers and Teachers of the Church for us Christians. In what does their greatness consist, and on what does their special significance for us depend? The Church, brethren, is the house of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth (I Timothy 3:15). Christian truth is preserved in the Church in Holy Scripture and Holy Tradition; but it requires a correct preservation and a correct interpretation. The significance of the Holy Fathers is to be found precisely in this: that they are the most capable preservers and interpreters of this truth by virtue of the sanctity of their lives, their profound knowledge of the word of God, and the abundance of the grace of the Holy Spirit which dwells in them." The rest of this sermon is composed of nothing but quotes from the Holy Fathers themselves (Sts. Athanasius the Great, Basil the Great, Simeon the New Theologian, Nicetas Stethatos) to support this view.

The final Holy Father whom Archbishop Theophanes quotes, at great length, in his sermon, is one close to him in time, a predecessor of his in the transmission of the authentic patristic tradition in Russia—Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov. He has a double significance for us today: not only is he a Holy Father of almost our own times, but also his search for truth is very similar to that of sincere truth-seekers today, and he thus shows us how it is possible for the "enlightened modern man" to enter once again the pure atmosphere of patristic—that is, true Orthodox Christian—ideas and ways of thinking. It is extremely inspiring for us to read, in the words of Bishop Ignatius himself, how a military engineer burst the bonds of "modern knowledge" and entered the patristic tradition, which he received, in addition to books, directly from a disciple of St. Paisius Velichkovsky, and handed down to our own day.

"When I was still a student," Archbishop Theophanes quotes Bishop Ignatius,⁵ "there were no enjoyments or distractions for me! The world presented nothing enticing for me. My mind was entirely immersed in the sciences, and at the same time I was burning with the desire to find out where was the true faith, where was the true teaching of it, foreign to errors both dogmatic and moral.

"At the same time there was already presented to my gaze the boundaries of human knowledge in the highest, fully developed sciences. Coming to these boundaries, I asked of the sciences: 'What do you give that a man may call his own? Man is eternal, and what is his own should be eternal. Show me this eternal possession, this true wealth, which I might take with me beyond the grave! Up to now I see only knowledge which ends with the earth, which cannot exist after the separation of the soul from the body.'"

The searching youth inquired in turn of mathematics, physics, chemistry, philosophy, showing his profound knowledge of them; then of geography, geodesy, languages, literature; but he finds that they are all of the earth. In answer to all his agonized questioning he received the same reply similar searches receive

in our even more "enlightened" 20th century: "The sciences were silent." Then, "for a satisfactory answer, a truly necessary and living answer, I turned to faith. But where are you hidden, O true and holy Faith? I could not recognize you in fanaticism {Papism} which was not sealed with the Gospel meekness; it breathed passion and high-mindedness! I could not recognize you in the arbitrary teaching {Protestantism} which separated from the Church, making up its own new system, vainly and prudentially proclaiming the discovery of a new, true Christian faith, after a lapse of eighteen centuries from the Incarnation of God the Word! Oh! In what a heavy perplexity my soul was! How frightfully it was weighed down! What waves of doubt rose up against it, arising from distrust of myself, from distrust of everything that was clamoring, crying out around me because of my lack of knowledge, my ignorance of the truth.

"And I began often, with tears, to implore God that He might not give me over as a sacrifice to error, but that He might show me the right path on which I should direct towards Him my invisible journey of mind and heart. And, O wonder!

Suddenly a thought stood before me... My heart went out to it as to The embrace of a friend. This thought inspired me to study faith in the sources—in the writings of the Holy Fathers! 'Their holiness,' the thought said to me, 'vouches for their trustworthiness: choose them for your guides.' I obeyed. I found means of obtaining the works of the holy pleasers of God, and in eagerness I began to read them, investigate them deeply. Having read some, I would take up and read others, read them, re-read them, study them. What was it that above all else struck me in the works of the Fathers of the Orthodox Church? It was their harmony, their wondrous, magnificent harmony. Eighteen centuries, through their lips, testified to a single unanimous teaching, a Divine teaching!

"When on a clear autumn night I gaze at the clear sky, sown with numberless stars, so diverse in size yet shedding a single light, then I say to myself: such are the writings of the Fathers! When on a summer day I gaze at the vast sea, covered with a multitude of diverse vessels with their unfurled sails like white swans' wings, vessels racing under a single wind to a single goal, to a single harbor, I say to myself: such are the writings of the Fathers! When I hear a harmonious, many-voiced choir, in which diverse voices in elegant harmony sing a single Divine song, then I say to myself: such are the writings of the Fathers!

"And what teaching do I find in them? I find a teaching repeated by all the Fathers, namely, that the only path to salvation is the unwavering following of the instructions of the Holy Fathers. 'Have you seen,' they say, 'anyone deceived by false teaching, perishing from an incorrect choice of ascetic labors?—then know that he followed himself, his own understanding, his own opinions, and not the teaching of the Fathers' (Abba Dorotheus, Fifth Instruction), out of which is composed the dogmatic and moral tradition of the Church. With this tradition as a priceless possession, the Church nourishes her children.

This thought was sent by God, from Whom is every good gift, from Whom a good through is the beginning of every good thing... This thought was for me the first harbor in the land of truth. Here my soul found rest from the waves and winds.

This thought became the foundation stone for the spiritual building of my soul. This thought became my guiding star. It began constantly to illumine for me the very difficult and much-suffering, narrow, invisible path of the mind and heart toward God. I looked at the religious world with this thought, and I saw: the cause of all errors consists in ignorance, in forgetfulness, in the absence of this thought.

"The reading of the Fathers clearly convinced me that salvation in the bosom of the Orthodox Russian Church was undoubtedly something of which the religions of Western Europe are deprived, since they have not preserved whole either the dogmatic or the moral teaching of the Church of Christ from her beginning. It revealed to me what Christ has done for mankind, in what consists the fall of man, why a Redeemer was necessary, in what consists the salvation procured by the Redeemer. It inculcated in me that one must develop, sense, see salvation in oneself, without which faith in Christ is dead, and Christianity is a word and a name without being put into effect! It instructed me to look upon eternity as eternity, before which a thousand years of earthly life is nothing, let alone our life which is measured by some half a century. It instructed me that earthly life must lead to preparation for eternity... It showed me that all earthly occupations, enjoyments, honor, pre-eminence—are empty toys, with which grown-up children play and in which they lose the blessedness of eternity... All this the Holy Fathers set forth with complete celerity in their sacredly splendid writings.'

Archbishop Theophanes concludes his patristic exhortation with this appeal: "Brethren, let this good thought {the taking of the Holy Fathers as our guide} be your guiding star also in the days of your earthly pilgrimage on the waves of the sea of life!"

The truth of this appeal, as of the inspired words of Bishop Ignatius, has not dimmed in the decades since they were uttered. The world has gone for on the path of apostasy from Christian Truth, and it becomes ever more clear that there is no alternative to this path save that of following the uncompromising path of truth which the Holy Fathers have handed down to us.

Yet we must go to the Holy Fathers not merely to "learn about them;" if we do no more than this we are in no better state than the idle disputants of the dead academies of this perishing modern civilization, even when these academies are "Orthodox" and the learned theologians in them neatly define and explain all about "sanctity" and "spirituality" and "theosis," but have not the experience needed to speak straight to the heart of thirsting souls and wound them into desiring the path of spiritual struggle, nor the knowledge to detect the fatal error of the academic "theologians" who speak of God with cigarette or wineglass in hand, nor the courage to accuse the apostate "canonical" hierarchs of their betrayal of Christ. We must go to the Holy Fathers, rather, in order to become their disciples, to receive the teaching of true life, the soul's salvation, even while knowing that by doing this we shall lose the favor of this world and become outcasts from it. If we do this we shall find the way out of the confused swamp of modern thought, which is based precisely upon abandonment of the sacred teaching of the Fathers. We shall find that the Holy Fathers are most "contemporary" in that they speak directly to the

struggle of the Orthodox Christian today, giving answers to the crucial questions of life and death which mere academic scholarship is usually afraid even to ask—and when it does ask them, gives a harmless answer which "explains" these questions to those who are merely curious about them, but are not thirsting for answers. We shall find true guidance from the Fathers, learning humility and distrust of our own vain worldly wisdom, which we have sucked in with the air of the pestilential times, by means of trusting those who have pleased God and not the world. We shall find in them true fathers, so lacking in our own day when the love of many has grown cold (Matthew 24:12)—fathers whose only aim is to lead us their children to God and His Heavenly Kingdom, where we shall walk and converse with these angelic men in unutterable joy forever.

There is no problem of our own confused times which cannot find its solution by a careful and reverent reading of the Holy Fathers: whether the problem of the sects and heresies that abound today, or the schisms and "jurisdictions;" whether the pretense of spiritual life put forth by the charismatic revival," or the subtle temptations of modern comfort and conveniences; whether complex philosophical questions such as "evolution," or the straightforward moral questions of abortion, euthanasia, and "birth control;" whether the refined apostasy of "Sergianism," which offers a church organization in place of the Body of Christ, or the crudeness of the "renovationism," which begins by "revising the calendar" and ends in "Eastern-rite Protestantism." In all these questions the Holy Fathers, and our living Fathers who follow them, are our only sure guide.

Bishop Ignatius and other recent Fathers have indicated for us last Christians which Holy Fathers are the most important for us to read, and in what order. May this be an inspiration to us all to place the patristic teaching as the foundation stone of the building of our own souls, unto the inheritance of everlasting life! Amen.

1. "The Liturgical Theology of Fr. A. Schmemann," in *The Orthodox Word*, 1970, No. 6, Pp. 260-280.
2. A thesis thoroughly refuted by Nadejda Gorodetsky in *Saint Tikhon Zadonsky, Inspirer of Dostoyevsky*, SPCK, London, 1951.
3. See Fedotov's introductions to the writings of these Saints in *A Treasury of Russian Spirituality*, Sheed & Ward, New York, 1948.
4. A brief life of him in English may be read in *The Orthodox Word*, 1969, No. 5.
5. From Volume I of Bishop Ignatius' *Collected Works* in Russian, pp. 396-401.